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## A Half-Colonization: The Problem of the White Colonial Woman Writer

### Abstract

In the 1986 book, *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing*, the editors (Kirsten Hoist Petersen and Anna Rutherford) claim that all women in colonial and post-colonial countries are doubly-colonized: by patriarchal society as well as by the dominant imperial or metropolitan power. In my view, *A Double Colonization* makes insufficient distinction between the position of Australian, Canadian, South African, or Creole women of European descent and their Aboriginal, Native Indian, Black African, or West Indian counterparts - that is, between the daughters of the colonizers and the colonized.<sup>^</sup> The white-settler woman and her descendants occupy a privileged position in comparison to their darker native or slave-descended sisters. While the native woman is truly doubly-oppressed or doubly-colonized, by male dominance as well as by white economic and social dominance, the white settler woman can best be described as half-colonized. Although she too is oppressed by white men and patriarchal structures, she shares in the power and guilt of the colonists.

# A Half-Colonization: The Problem of the White Colonial Woman Writer

In the 1986 book, *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing*, the editors (Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford) claim that all women in colonial and post-colonial countries are doubly-colonized: by patriarchal society as well as by the dominant imperial or metropolitan power. In my view, *A Double Colonization* makes insufficient distinction between the position of Australian, Canadian, South African, or Creole women of European descent and their Aboriginal, Native Indian, Black African, or West Indian counterparts – that is, between the daughters of the colonizers and the colonized.<sup>1</sup> The white-settler woman and her descendants occupy a privileged position in comparison to their darker native or slave-descended sisters. While the native woman is truly doubly-oppressed or doubly-colonized, by male dominance as well as by white economic and social dominance, the white settler woman can best be described as half-colonized. Although she too is oppressed by white men and patriarchal structures, she shares in the power and guilt of the colonists.

The best white woman writers are acutely aware of this dilemma. For example, Nadine Gordimer (who contributed a story to *A Double Colonization*) has dealt at length with the problematic identification between white women and black women in South Africa. In fact, her public reluctance to embrace feminism stems from her oft-stated view that no perceived oppression of white South African women can compare with the massive and myriad forms of oppression suffered by black men and women in that country.<sup>2</sup> One of the subjects which most interests Gordimer is the privileged white woman who ventures into blackness, seeking to find herself through political action and personal relationship with the colonized majority of her country. Gordimer has pursued this subject from her first novel, *The Lying Days*, to her most recent, *A Sport of Nature*; in several other novels, most notably *The Late Bourgeois World*, *Occasion for Loving*, *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People*; as well as in short stories throughout her career. Although Gordimer's narrative form and style, her political analysis and protagonists have become more sophisticated over the last thirty-five years, the dilemma

remains the same. The protagonist's efforts are well-meaning but misdirected, due to her own lack of historical and self-understanding – or misconstrued, due to the political stalemate and hostility between the races in South Africa. Thus her groping toward solidarity ends in alienation, exile, imprisonment or violence; there is, according to Gordimer, no easy identification between the women of the colonizers and the colonized.

Gordimer's view is supported by the work of other major white colonial woman writers, most notably Doris Lessing and Jean Rhys. Again, in the fiction of these writers the white protagonist's problem is not that she is doubly-colonized. Her oppression as a woman draws her toward the colonized blacks, but her race and class ally her, in spite of herself, with the male colonizers: with her father, brother, or husband. While as a woman she has fewer social and economic privileges than the white men to whom she is subordinate, as a member of the colonizer, settler or planter aristocracy, she has social and economic privileges denied to the black majority, male and female.

In an early Lessing story, 'The Old Chief Mshlanga', the unnamed main character, a young Southern African colonial girl, ventures into 'the old Chief's country' only to realize that she is one of its 'destroyers'; her discovery of this idyllic land as yet untouched by white settlement is a reenactment of the European's invasion of Africa. The girl's intrusion into the lush, peaceful landscape is met with a wall of hostility; her premonition of destruction fulfilled. After Chief Mshlanga and his people are removed to facilitate white settlement, she makes a last visit to the site of the village to find it in ruins.

Lessing's character's intention of friendship is depicted as irrelevant to the chain of events – which is, significantly, set in motion by her own father – leading to the Chief and his people losing their land. Thus, although as a mere girl she has no power to prevent this tragedy, as a daughter of the invaders she shares in responsibility. In her words, 'I had learned that if one cannot call a country to heel like dog, neither can one dismiss the past with a smile in an easy gush of feeling, saying: I could not help it, I am also a victim.'<sup>3</sup> As Lessing has said elsewhere, 'The children and grandchildren of these invaders condemn their parents, wish they could repudiate their own history. But that is not so easy.'<sup>4</sup>

Lessing elaborates on the problematic position of the daughter of the invaders in the *Children of Violence* series; Martha Quest's legacy of violence includes the colonization of Africa, a history which she was born into, deplores, but by virtue of her skin privilege, colludes in. She awakes to an understanding of her self and her history through her identification with the Africans, who are themselves awakening to their latent power and the

certainty of freedom. Martha expresses her identification with the blacks, as well as her rebellion against white-settler mores, by joining a communist group whose stated aim is black revolution. But as the group's political contradictions and interpersonal conflicts come to the fore, Martha's only desire is to escape from the colony.

Martha's longing to become one with the African land and people is always defeated; in one key passage she has a revelation of the irrevocable 'separateness' that seems to have been 'bred from the very soil' of Southern Africa. As Lessing describes it, 'The effort of imagination needed to destroy the words *black, white, nation, race* exhausted her ...'<sup>5</sup> As we follow Martha through the four volumes of the *Children of Violence* series set in Africa, the sense of her spiritual exile from both white and black colonial 'Zambesia' grows until it is certain that she will emigrate to England.

Martha, like other Lessing heroines, is alienated and marginalized: as a woman in a male-dominated society, as a white in Africa, as a colonial in Britain, as first a Communist, then an ex-Communist. Exiled, alienated and marginalized as she is, however, she cannot be described as doubly-colonized; her unwilling, ambiguous role of female colonist, daughter of the colonizers, is the root of her dilemma.

The fate of Gordimer's white female protagonists in post-colonial, but pre-liberation South Africa is less dramatically pessimistic than that of Martha Quest and other Lessing characters, but their position vis a vis white and black society is similar. In *The Lying Days*, Helen Shaw's attraction to and tentative involvement with blacks is thwarted by the increasingly severe apartheid laws of the Afrikaner Nationalists. Helen's naive attempt to identify with her fellow student Mary Seswayo fails to illuminate the gulf which separates them. In the the novel's climax, when 'violence flowers' in the township (to borrow Gordimer's phrase from *The Conservationist*), Helen remains a spectator, trapped behind glass. As Helen explains, 'It happened around me, not to me. Even the death of a man; behind a wall of glass.'<sup>6</sup> The end of the novel sees her, like Martha Quest, en route to Europe. Full of guilt, fear and self-doubt, she is an ironic, indirect victim of apartheid.

The female protagonists of *The Late Bourgeois World*, *Occasion of Loving*, *Burger's Daughter*, and *A Sport of Nature* commit themselves more definitively to the cause of black liberation, becoming more radical as the political situation dictates under an increasingly repressive apartheid regime. Rosa Burger is Gordimer's most political, least naive, most self-aware and historically conscious heroine, but even she – the daughter of a Communist martyr – is hampered by white privilege. In *Burger's Daughter*, Gordimer provides a sarcastic portrait of white middle-class feminists who attempt to

make common cause with black working women. She treats with more respect the dilemma of the white Communists who, in spite of their risks and sacrifices, are barred from fully sharing the blacks' burden of oppression and resistance – barred not only by the government's apartheid decrees but also by the rising hostility of the young black militants. Rosa, disillusioned with a wary of political involvement, is critical of the 'sensuous-redemptive' appeal of blackness of whites, but she admits to feeling it herself. The magnetic attraction of blackness for Rosa, her 'old Chief's country', is embodied in Marisa Kgosana, a heroic, stunning Winnie Mandela figure who is in fact described as a beautiful black country which Rosa longs to enter. Gordimer writes:

To touch in women's token embrace against the live, night cheek of Marisa, seeing huge for a second the lake-flash of her eye, the lilac-pink of her inner lip against the translucent-edged teeth, to enter for a moment the invisible magnetic field of the body of a beautiful creature and receive on oneself its imprint ... this was to immerse in another mode of perception ... Through blackness is revealed the way to the future.<sup>7</sup>

In the end, Gordimer does allow Rosa to win a form of sisterhood with Marisa. This time, when 'violence flowers' in the form of the Soweto uprising of 1976, Rosa joins Marisa in the prison where her own mother had been incarcerated – the prison which is perhaps the central site and image of the novel. Ironical as the novel's ending certainly is, Rosa is described as having come home to and making a home in prison, which, as the narrator comments wryly, is 'not among the separate amenities the country prides itself on providing' (p. 354). Within the walls which confine the state's opponents, apartheid is loosened; paradoxically, the detainees win a victory of sorts. In one of the novel's final images, when Marisa connives a visit with Rosa, 'Laughter escaped through the thick diamond-mesh and bars of Rosa's cell' (p. 355).

Rosa is typical of Gordimer's central characters in that she struggles, not out from under the yoke of 'double colonization', but rather to *share* that yoke, to move from the luxurious armed camp of the colonizer to the political prison of the colonized, from the sterile enclave of the whites to the materially impoverished but spiritually rich territory of the blacks, which is pregnant with 'the future'.

The white colonial woman's attraction to blackness, her longing to *be* black, is a strong theme in Jean Rhys' fiction as well. In *Voyage in the Dark* Anna Morgan says, '... I always wanted to be black ... Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad.'<sup>8</sup> As a girl, Anna escapes from the

tyranny of her stereotypical English stepmother, Hester, to her beloved black 'mother', Francine. But when she becomes a woman, upon her first menstruation in fact, Anna's childhood identification with Francine is broken. Anna thinks:

But I knew that of course she disliked me too because I was white; and that I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white. Being white and getting like Hester. ... And I knew that day that I'd started to grow old and nothing could stop it (p. 72).

For Anna, then, the passage from childhood to adulthood is also the passage from black to white, from the West Indies to England, from warmth and light to cold and dark. Having lost Francine and blackness, having rejected Hester and whiteness, Anna is literally and figuratively a lost soul.

There are other hints of unease in Anna's wistful, idealizing memories of her lost island, including the carnival scene in which black dancers wearing masks which caricature European features insolently stick out their tongues at their white audience. When Anna's island dream becomes Antoinette's nightmare in Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the masked hostility of the carnival dancers becomes the undisguised rage of the rebellious mob, and the mocking tongues are replaced by torches and stones.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is perhaps the archetypal statement of the white colonial woman's position. Antoinette is victimized as a woman in classic nineteenth-century manner: she is sold into a soul-destroying marriage. But her victimization as a colonial is more complex, for her loss of self is connected to her rejection by the blacks of her beloved native island. In post-Emancipation Jamaica, Antoinette and her family of impoverished ex-slave-owners are despised as 'white niggers' or 'white cockroaches' by the blacks. At the same time, they are viewed with suspicion by the other whites, who, 'when trouble comes, close ranks. ... But we were not in their ranks.'<sup>9</sup>

In the scene in which Antoinette and her family are forced to flee from their home by black rebellion, her playmate and alter ego, Tia, attacks her with a stone, so shattering their identification. As Antoinette narrates:

... I ran to her. ... We had eaten the same food, a slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. ... When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. ... We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass (p. 38).

In this scene are the roots of Antoinette's insanity, exile and imprisonment in England; her madness is an attempt to recover Coulibri and reestablish

her identification with Tia. The night she sets fire to 'Rochester's' house she dreams that in the red sky she sees Coulibri restored:

When I looked over the edge [of the battlement] I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated, she laughed. ... I called 'Tia!' and jumped and woke. (p. 155)

By setting fire to 'Rochester's' house, Antoinette takes up the torch of the blacks who set fire to Coulibri, picks up the stone that Tia threw at her. Antoinette's madness, then, is a process of becoming Tia: her angry black Other.<sup>10</sup> Through her violence against the Rochester character and his house, she reintegrates and redeems herself by joining forces with the (female) colonized against the (male) colonizer.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* draws together themes and images that run through the fiction of Lessing and Gordimer as well as Rhys' early work, and which typify the white colonial woman's experience in literature. Antoinette's ambiguous role as both victim and aggressor in colonial violence is a recurrent preoccupation in these texts. Like Antoinette, Gordimer's female characters also transform themselves from passive aggressors/victims/observers to actors in the drama of liberation. Helen watched the death of a man from behind a car window, but Gordimer's subsequent heroines plot with the outlawed ANC, commit acts of sabotage, go into political exile or prison, love and marry black men. Nevertheless, their successes are tempered by what Gordimer depicts as the impossibility of fully overcoming their compromised and marginalized status as whites in the black liberation struggle.

Gordimer spins a web of irony around her well-intentioned but thwarted white characters which extends to an ironic awareness of her own somewhat ambiguous position as a white writer in South Africa, living in the 'interregnum ... not only between two social orders but between two identities'.<sup>11</sup> Lessing, who concluded early in her career that she had reached a stalemate as a white writer in Africa, progressively withdrew her characters from Southern Africa politics, indeed from Southern Africa itself, after she left Rhodesia in 1949.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Lessing's women carry Africa within them, and like Rhys' exiled heroines act out the transformation into the Other in dream and fantasy. In an allusion of *Jane Eyre* which predates Rhys' use of Bronte in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Martha Quest in *The Four-Gated City* breaks down into her Other: Lynda Coldridge, the madwoman in the basement. Martha's reintegration of self and Other empowers her with clairvoyance that allows her to survive nuclear war and to help found a Utopian community. On a more realistic level, Gordimer's Rosa Burger



reintegrates self and other, and so redeems herself by giving up white privilege/white alienation to join Marisa Kgosana in prison.

Different as Rhys, Lessing and Gordimer are, their depictions of the white colonial woman show how her identification with the native, colonized, Other is complicated by her bonds with the colonizers – the bonds of her own history, which as Lessing argues, cannot be easily repudiated, and as Lessing, Gordimer and Rhys demonstrate, cannot be broken without risk of violence, of madness, of self-destruction.

## NOTES

1. Other recent criticism of colonial women's narratives compounds the error. For example, Josephine Dodd ('Naming and Framing: Naturalization and Colonization in J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*', WLWE 27,2 [1987], 153-161) writes that 'Magda is the victim of double colonization'. Dodd's disclaimer that, 'I am not unaware of the fact that she participates in the colonization of Hendrik and Anna, but this is beyond the scope of the present essay' (p. 161), only indicates the difficulty critics have with the concept of 'double colonization' when dealing with white writers and characters.
2. Gordimer has made this point in many essays and interviews. See, for example, "A Story for This Place and Time"...' (Interview with Susan Gardner), *Kunapipi* 3,2 (1981), 99-112.
3. Doris Lessing, 'The Old Chief Mshlanga', 1951; *This Was The Old Chief's Country* Volume One of *Collected African Stories* (London: Joseph, 1973), 11-22, p. 19.
4. \_\_\_\_\_, Forward to *An Ill-fated People: Zimbabwe Before and After Rhodes* by Lawrence Vambe (London: Heinemann, 1972) xiii-xxi, p. xvii.
5. \_\_\_\_\_, *Martha Quest* (1952; Frogmore: Panther, 1966), p. 56.
6. Nadine Gordimer, *The Lying Days* (London: Cape, 1953), p. 351.
7. \_\_\_\_\_, *Burger's Daughter* (1979; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), pp. 134-135. All quotations are from this edition.
8. Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934; New York: Norton, n.d.), p. 31. All quotations are from this edition.
9. \_\_\_\_\_, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 15. All quotations are from this edition.
10. I expand on this idea in 'Othering the Self: Nadine Gordimer's Colonial Heroines', *ARIEL* 19,4 (Oct. 1988), 33-42. I am indebted to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's discussion of Rhys and Bronte in 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', 1985; rpt. in *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986), 262-80.
11. Nadine Gordimer, 'Living in the Intrregnum', *NYRB* 20 Jan. 1983, 21-29, p. 22.
12. In *Going Home* (1957; revised ed. 1968) Lessing explains this artistic withdrawal as well as her situation as a political exile forbidden to return to either Rhodesia or South Africa.